Abstract:

This paper analyses research findings from a SSHRC (CURA) funded pilot project entitled ‘Bridging the Solitudes’ which investigates the post-secondary school experiences of marginalised youth, many of whom are recent immigrants to Canada, attending Seneca College and York University. The central aim of the Bridging project was to recruit vulnerable youth to post-secondary education and assist with their transition to college and university by offering funding and other supports as they progressed through their academic programs. A second objective was to facilitate the students’ transition to the labour market by offering them a paid work placement at a non-profit organization (community-based organization or union) where social justice goals such as advocating on behalf of workers and offering supports to under serviced and disadvantaged communities within the city of Toronto were central aims of the organization. This paper explores the benefits of this work placement program, not only for the Bridging students, but also for the organizations where they were placed. An analysis of interviews conducted during the summer of 2004 with individuals who directly supervised the Bridging students indicates that many placement supervisors highly valued the marginalised perspective and identity of the Bridging students. The students’ marginal viewpoint was seen by the supervisors as a major factor in their ability to understand social justice issues which facilitated their connection to the community members or clientele, and furthered their participation and contributions to the community-based organization or union. A key finding of this Bridging research is that non-profit organizations place an enormous value on students’ commitment to an alternative world view, of promoting equality for vulnerable groups in society, and of recognizing the importance of collective organization for redressing fundamental social and economic inequalities in society.
If the education system is simply to provide high-level human power for the corporate world, then the justice being sought by the university … is that of bringing parents and students in line to accept the priorities of the corporate world. The same corporate world has been the driving force behind the dismantling of the entitlements of working people.


Introduction

This paper analyses research findings from a SSHRC (CURA) funded pilot project entitled ‘Bridging the Solitudes’ which investigates the post-secondary school experiences of marginalised youth, many of whom are recent immigrants to Canada, attending Seneca College and York University. A central aim of the ‘Bridging the Solitudes’ project was to recruit disadvantaged youth, and assist with their transition to college and university by offering funding and other supports as they progress through their academic programs. A second objective was to facilitate the students’ transition to the labour market by offering a work placement. A core set of research questions concentrate on the barriers marginalised youth face when they enter post-secondary education. A second line of inquiry, and the focus of this paper, explores the value of a work placement program, not only for the Bridging students, but also for the organizations where they were placed.

This paper offers a preliminary analysis of interviews conducted during the summer of 2004 with work placement community partners. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals who directly supervised the Bridging students. The interview lasted from one to two hours. Questions were asked about the students’ work contributions to
the organization, the role of the supervisor(s) in the placement experience and the perception by the supervisor of the students’ marginal status.

The interview findings raise questions about the background and life experience of the Bridging students and how their class, racialised (immigrant) or other community identity influenced their participation and involvement in the placement organization. It is argued that the Bridging students’ marginalised identity was viewed by many of the Placement supervisors as a valuable asset to the organization. This observation runs counter to the literature on racial minorities labour market access that characterizes immigrants and other racialised groups along the lines of a “deficit model” whereby minorities are seen to under perform in the workplace based on language acquisition and other cultural factors that operate as barriers to the job market.¹ As discussed further below, rather than social disadvantage operating as a “deficit” to the labour market, the Bridging students’ “marginal” identity or viewpoint was often identified by the community partners as a major factor in their ability to serve community members or their clientele, and thereby furthered their accessibility and participation in the community.

The Placements

Community organizations and trade unions offered the “bridging students” placements at their organization in their third year of study. The first student cohort was given placements in the summer of 2003 or the fall/winter academic year of 2003-04; most of the second cohort worked at their placements the following summer 2004. The SSHRC grant paid for the work placements at community-based organizations while the trade
union partners paid for the Bridging students who worked at their organizations. The length of time at the work placement varied slightly from organization to organization, however, most of the community-based organizations employed students part-time (20 hours per week) for twelve weeks of the summer. The trade unions offered full-time placements that often lasted longer than 12 weeks during the summer, and some trade unions provided one day per week placements to coincide with the academic school year, beginning in September and ending in mid April.

The objective of the work placement program was to link students with non-profit organizations that focus on social justice issues such as advocating on behalf of workers and offering supports to under serviced and disadvantaged communities within the city of Toronto. Generally speaking, educators, governments and academics in Canada have encouraged and sponsored co-op or work study programs between university or college and private sector employers (see: Chrysdale et. al. 1999; O’Higgins, 2001). However, business enterprises emphasize firm-specific skills related to a particular industry and do not represent the only “training ground” for students. Non-profit organizations can provide valuable experience and open up possibilities for learning that are not available in the business sector. The rationale for placing Bridging students in the non-profit sector was to familiarize them with progressive sectors that place a value on social and community needs, rather than on market or industry goals. For instance, the purpose of the union placements was to acquaint, and adapt, students to a trade union environment, to learn about workplace rights, to understand what unions do, and encourage students to consider a career in a labour organization. Similarly, placing students at community-
based organizations presents students with the possibility of choosing an alternative career path in a community-based organization – an organization that provides needed services to minority communities, especially those that assist racialised minorities, particularly immigrants and refugees, as well as the poor and other disadvantaged groups in Toronto.

A further aim of the Bridging program was to foster relationships with community partners in an effort to diversify the staff and leadership of those organizations. This goal was especially relevant to the trade union partners whose organizations are not representative of equity groups. The unions, we hoped, would benefit from the participation of young people by fulfilling their goal of recruiting youth to the labour movement. Canadian unions have been losing membership over the past decade and their memberships are getting older; the average age of union members at the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union, the Canadian Autoworkers Union and the Public Service Alliance is around 45 years of age (Swift, 2003). The labour movement is interested in attracting young people to the labour movement and educating youth about worker rights. Stuart Tannock and Sara Flocks (2002) survey of youth programs in the Canadian labour movement shows most of the big unions in Canada have established youth programs. The Canadian Labour Congress adopted a resolution in 1996 for its affiliates to reach out to youth and make youth organizing a priority. The bridging project, then, capitalized and built on this youth agenda.
The project was also intended to build a bridge to community service organizations, albeit diversifying the staff and leadership of community-based groups along equity lines was not identified by the participants as a necessary objective of the project. Instead, the needs of the community groups correspond more closely with the potential contributions of the Bridging students whose education, life experience and personal outlook could bring needed support to community programs. Given this goal, did the community partners benefit from the Bridging access program? And, did the students, who are underrepresented in the mainstream Canadian labour market, gain greater acceptance and accessibility to the Placement community whose membership is also marginalized?

Findings

I identified three responses to the Bridging students by the community partner organizations. The first response can be described in reference to the *instrumental* needs of the organization, the second response recognizes the importance of the students’ world view or minority experience which I refer to as the ‘*social justice perspective*’ and the third response places emphasis on ‘*community citizenship*’ or the ability of the student to identify with the culture and problems of the placement community. In some instances, community partners valued both the instrumental and social justice or citizenship contributions of Bridging participants. Moreover, the community partners often had different understandings of who is a ‘marginalised student’ which shaped their relationship to the Bridging participants and informed their decisions about what kinds of tasks or projects they assigned to students. These three responses are elaborated upon below.
**Instrumental Response**

Surprisingly, perhaps, a few community partners engaged the students in their organization primarily as workers or employees. They viewed their involvement in the Bridging project, and their supervisory role, in terms of providing useful work experience. For instance, in response to my question about the community-based organization’s expectation of the Bridging student and what they hoped to gain from their participation in the project, a supervisor commented: ²

> To be honest with you, no, we didn’t have any real expectations. I guess our focus is that we just wanted to help the youth… The only expectations that we had is that the individual [Bridging student] would be coming who wants to work and he wants to gain experience, be willing to work and be able to fit into the environment. And that was our only real expectation we had.

Similarly, a placement Supervisor at this trade union responded to the question about organizational expectations by stating, “I thought they were really just workers, you know, we were just hiring them.” ³ Another community-based organization supervisor stated: “I never have expectations, then I’m not disappointed…. You know, not all work is glamour.” ⁴

As indicated above, these Supervisors did not envision the role of the student(s) within their broader community or involve them in pursuits or activities which serve larger organizational goals. For instance, the union did not structure the placement experience to educate the student about the collective bargaining function of the union, the services provided to union members, or the role of the union within the broader labour movement. The prospect of initiating students to the progressive goals of unionism was not a top
priority at this union, neither was the opportunity of recruiting students to promote equity and diversity within the organization viewed as an option. This approach to the Bridging project may reflect the narrow definition of union education in the Canadian labour movement which conceives of labour education as “education and training by labour unions (trade unions) to their members and representatives.” (Spencer, 2002:17) Indeed, the Supervisor remarked that the union offers “tremendous amount of union training for our leaders, but it’s internal” to the union.\(^5\)

At these organizations the contributions of the students that were most highly valued related to the specific skills they brought to the organization. For example, the union Supervisor commented on the “useful research” and the student’s expertise in the application of Microsoft Word. Another community service Supervisor commented that the student brought “computer skills, ability to take directions and follow those directions accordingly”.\(^6\) I do not want to suggest that only a few organizations appreciated the skills, special talents and abilities of the Bridging students. In fact, all of the community partners valued the competencies and wide range of skills, especially computer literacy, the Bridging students contributed to their organizations. Almost every Supervisor commented on the superb training and high skill level of the students, particularly the ability of the students to work autonomously, to be self-motivated and to self-direct their own projects. However, some of the community-partner organizations placed the greatest emphasis, or highest priority, on the skills of students as *workers* and did not appreciate, or seem to be fully cognizant of, the broader objectives of the Bridging access program.
Social Justice Response

In contrast to the instrumental approach to Bridging, many community partners embraced students who they perceived to convey a marginal identity, and who held an alternative perspective to the mainstream, and brought this viewpoint to their work and community involvement. In some instances a marginal outlook was understood to be synonymous with a commitment to social justice struggles, as this union Supervisor remarks: 7

...I think at the union our greater concern [is] having a student who has a demonstrated commitment to social justice. And very often students who have come from marginalised backgrounds are readily able to identify with social justice issues because they’re coming from a background where those issues are real…. I don’t ask questions about the student’s background…. it’s not relevant to the Placement per se… what is more relevant is the philosophical viewpoint of the student – where he [sic] is coming from and whether or not they can identify with social justice issues.

This union Supervisor went on to say that “the students don’t necessarily have to have any interest in unions per se.” What is of utmost importance, according to this union official, is the marginal or social justice standpoint that provides a foundation for engaging in the life of the union, or the union culture, and the politics of labour struggle. Requiring a commitment to social justice issues was not regarded as an abstract principle of the organization, but rather it is seen as a necessary requisite for employment in the union and therefore is directly linked to the (potential) objective of recruiting Bridging youth to the labour movement: 8

...the work we do is very demanding …very demanding, not only physically, but also psychologically because the work you’re doing is your struggle and when you’re in struggle, there’s a push and pull and that can be very demanding on you psychologically as well… So, in my view, if you’re interested in working for the union, you need not only, you need an ideological strength for the work that you’re doing.
Another aspect of the ‘social justice perspective’ identified by unions was the ‘outsider’ viewpoint brought by students who were not familiar with the union culture. For instance, a union Supervisor commented that he deliberately recruited young black males in the Bridging interview student selection process because he wanted a “refreshing” point of view – a student who was sensitive to issues of class and race inequality, but not someone who was “inculcated into the union culture”.\textsuperscript{9} He respected the racialized and class perspective of the students who challenged the mainstream values of the union.

\textit{Community Citizenship}

A third approach to the Bridging students was to value their contribution as “community citizen.” At the community-based organizations the marginal identity of students was interpreted as a positive attribute because the students share similar backgrounds to the clients they serve. As this community service organization supervisor explained:\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{quote}
She brings a perspective from where she comes from, I mean her experience and perspective... you know, she’s only been in Canada for three years and she understands a lot of our clients are new Canadians so I think she brings that perspective... I think that’s why, one of the reasons why they’ve [clients] have taken to her, it’s because ...she’s not just another ... white middle class person trying to help out....
\end{quote}

This student was obviously valued by the organization because she understood what it is like to immigrate to Canada, to integrate into the Toronto labour market, which deepened her understanding of the difficulties faced by the clients she served at an employment centre. The immigrant experience of this Bridging student was also recognized by her
Supervisor as key to her communication and tutoring skills at a community service organization serving new Canadians from Africa:  

And the other thing that was useful was that she was able to tell the children that she immigrated to Canada that time, and in that short period she is now in university, and you know, there were some obstacles and how she fought to move out of barriers and obstacles and this and that…So, it’s an advantage as she was an immigrant, because sometimes we have some kids who’ve been raised here and born here and then you can see they don’t understand that sometimes people may need help with some kinds of problems because they never had that problem and never experienced it.

Again, marginal identity links directly with the problems and needs of the clientele and informed how the students related to members at the community-based organization. Similar to the union context, noted above, these Bridging students had an intuitive understanding (based on race, ethnic, class inequalities) of the minority student experience confronting new Canadians and could connect to the clientele knowing the context of their life experience.

Defining Marginality

Finally, it is important to note that some of the organizations had different conceptions of what it means to be “marginal” which influenced their interactions with the students. For instance, one of the community-based organization interviewees explained that compared to the “at risk” youth he worked with the Bridging students did not appear disadvantaged. He remarked that “I guess they’re from a working class background but I still wouldn’t necessarily use the term marginalised.” In the context of his comparison youth group in downtown Toronto who are homeless, unemployed, did not complete high school, and live in very unstable life and economic conditions, the Bridging students hardly looked
marginal. This problem of defining ‘marginal identity’ was also commented upon by another community service supervisor who works with a variety of placement students:

I’ve worked with volunteers in the community that are having trouble getting a job, [having] trouble keeping stable employment, multiple barriers to employment. I work with most of them. I also worked with M.A. students from U.of T. – middle class white kids, career path to academia or a management position and then I’ve worked with [the Bridging student[s] who]… hasn’t had a standard middle class upbringing – an environment in university is a bit – she’s having trouble adjusting… I can see the solitudes in that she’s got into university but it isn’t working out very well, it’s not an easy transition.

This community service worker (who is a political science graduate at York) recognized that ‘marginal’ has a different meaning depending on the social or community context.

While recognizing that the Bridging students were not marginal relative to the downtown Toronto youth, he recognized that their situation at York was one of disadvantage. He goes on to say that “They’re marginalized but they’re not at risk at all. I see the marginal compared to a standard university population”.13 Defining the Bridging students as “at risk” or “marginal” made a difference with respect to the level of supervision, the kinds of tasks assigned to the students, and the quality (amount) of interaction with students. For example, a student was assigned the task of shedding paper while another was given mundane clerical tasks. These jobs were seen to be commensurate with their skill level, their inability to integrate into the organization or relate to the broader community in which they were placed. If students were viewed by their Supervisors as “struggling on the margins” and the Supervisors did not put a value on a strong ideological (political) commitment to social justice, then the students were more likely to be treated as employees or workers, and far less likely to be valued as a community citizen.
Concluding Remarks

An important question raised by Horace Campbell, one of the founders of the University of Toronto Transitional Year Programme (who is cited at the beginning of this paper), is whether “teachers, faculties of education, and the unions [can] become part of the struggle for diversity and equity?” (Campbell, 2003: 52). Insofar as the community partners in the Bridging project were willing to involve students in a meaningful way in their organizations the answer to Horace Campbell’s query is “yes” – unions, university, college and community-based organizations do demonstrate the political will to work toward equity goals. A significant finding of the Bridging research is that non-profit organizations place an enormous value on students’ commitment to an alternative world view, of promoting equality for vulnerable groups in society, of recognizing the importance of collective organization and redressing fundamental social and economic inequalities.

Further, I would point out that post-secondary arts education offers a space for learning a public or community service ethos. As the grip of neo-liberal globalization intensifies whereby there is ever greater emphasis placed on “market-driven politics” (Leys, 2001), individualism and consumerism within the general culture, it becomes ever more important for universities and colleges to offer (not necessarily compel) education that places a value on the public service in a non-market context, and on valuing the importance of collective interests rather than accepting (market) values of individualism and self-interest. As Colin Leys argues, the communities that serve the public interest are diminishing, are
under greater pressure, and are having to defend themselves against neo-liberal logic. The university and college, then, which operate outside the market (at least for the moment) can provide a space for learning that promotes and values civil service – the values that are also appreciated and recognized by unions and community-based organizations. As Colin Leys explains (2001:223)

Responsibility for supporting the public domain must be shared …. [across] the whole state apparatus…. Its achievements must be honoured and its initiatives treated with respect.

He goes on to say that “public services are defining features of a civilized and democratic society” and that the very foundation of democracy depends upon their preservation “and not their decay”. I think the post-secondary education sector has an important role to play in advancing a knowledge-base that promotes community values; it also has a responsibility to promote diversity among the student and faculty population who can then participate and help preserve communities which support the public domain, and that promote values of social justice in society.

End Notes

1 This point was presented by Alan Simmons, “Critical Reflections on Immigrant and Labour Force Skills: New Data and Emerging Frameworks” at the Gender and Work Database Conference “Knowledge Production in Practice”, York University, October 1-2, 2004.

2 Community-service partner Supervisory Interview, July 8, 2004.

3 Union partner, Supervisory Interview, June 24, 2004.


5 Ibid.

6 Community-service partner, Supervisor Questionnaire, June, 2004.

7 Union partner, August 9, 2004.
References


Swift, Jamie. 2003. Walking the Union Walk: Stories From CEP’s First Ten Years. Toronto: Between the Lines.